

Message Text

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ORIGIN HEW-06

INFO OCT-01 OES-09 ISO-00 AF-10 ARA-14 EA-12 EUR-12
NEA-10 IO-14 SIG-03 MMO-01 INR-10 MED-05 NSAE-00
PA-02 HA-05 CA-01 ICA-20 CIAE-00 AID-05 FDRE-00
DODE-00 L-03 H-02 AGR-01 INT-05 COME-00 NSF-02
/153 R

DRAFTED BY DHEW/FDA: JRWEINROTH, M.D.:VO

APPROVED BY OES/ENP/EN: WJWALSH, III

DHEW/PHS/OASH/OIH: RFISCHER

AF:IKARAWA

EA:PCLEVELAND

EUR:MPARRIS

NEA:AKKORKY

ARA-LA SWILKINSON

-----122917 171521Z /46

P 171426Z AUG 78

FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO ALL DIPLOMATIC AND CONSULAR POSTS PRIORITY

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INFORM CONSULS

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SWEL, TBIO, EPAP, XX

SUBJECT: FDA-USDA STATEMENT ON NITRITES

1. ON AUGUST 11, 1978 FDA AND USDA ISSUED A JOINT STATEMENT ON THE USE OF NITRITES IN MEAT, POULTRY, AND FISH. THE STATEMENT IS QUOTED BELOW AND WAS ALSO SUPPLIED TO ALL FOREIGN EMBASSIES IN WASHINGTON. YOU MAY WISH TO SUPPLY THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT TO INTERESTED AGENCIES OF HOST GOVERNMENT AT YOUR DISCRETION.

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2. "THE USE OF NITRITE TO PRESERVE AND TO COLOR AND FLAVOR CURED MEATS, POULTRY AND FISH HAS BEEN THE SOURCE OF SCIENTIFIC DEBATE AND PUBLIC CONTROVERSY FOR A DECADE.

3. SINCE THE EARLY 1960'S, SCIENTISTS HAVE KNOWN THAT NITRITE COMBINED WITH CERTAIN CHEMICALS CAN FORM NITROSAMINES

A FAMILY OF CHEMICALS KNOWN TO PRODUCE CANCER IN TEST ANIMALS.

4. WE ARE NOW CONFRONTED WITH NEW CONCERNS ABOUT NITRITE. A STUDY RECENTLY COMPLETED FOR FDA BY THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY STRONGLY SUGGESTS THAT NITRITE PRODUCES CANCER OF THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM IN TEST ANIMALS. THE MECHANISM IS CLEARLY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF NITROSAMINES.

5. ALMOST THIRTEEN PERCENT OF THE TEST ANIMALS RECEIVING NITRITE CONTRACTED CANCER OF THE LYMPH SYSTEM, WHEREAS EIGHT PERCENT OF THOSE RECEIVING NO NITRITE CONTRACTED CANCER. THE DIFFERENCE IS SIGNIFICANT STATISTICALLY AND LEADS US TO THE CONCERN THAT NITRITE MAY INCREASE THE INCIDENCE OF HUMAN CANCER.

6. ABOUT 20 PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE HUMAN DIETARY EXPOSURE TO NITRITES NOW COMES FROM CURED FOOD PRODUCTS. THE REMAINING 80 PERCENT COMES FROM NITRATE IN OTHER SOURCES OF HUMAN FOOD. NITRATE EXISTS, FOR EXAMPLE, IN SUBSTANTIAL QUANTITIES IN SPINACH AND OTHER LEAFY VEGETABLES AND IN DRINKING WATER. BACTERIA IN OUR MOUTHS AND DIGESTIVE TRACTS CONVERT NITRATE AND OTHER NITROGEN-CONTAINING COMPOUNDS INTO NITRITE.

7. THE RESULTS OF THE MIT EXPERIMENTS NEVERTHELESS INDICATE UNCLASSIFIED

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THAT THE USE OF NITRITE AS A DELIBERATE ADDITIVE TO FOOD MAY POSE A HAZARD TO HUMAN HEALTH. HOWEVER, NITRITE ALSO PROTECTS AGAINST THE FORMATION OF BOTULINUM TOXIN, A DEADLY FOOD POISON. WE THUS ARE PRESENTED WITH A DIFFICULT BALANCE OF RISKS.

8. WE MUST WEIGH THE RISK ASSOCIATED WITH NITRITE ADDED TO FOOD AGAINST THE HEALTH RISK FROM NOT ADDING IT. ON THE ONE HAND, NITRITE MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR CURED MEATS, POULTRY AND FISH TO BE PROCESSED, TRANSPORTED, STORED AND SOLD WITHOUT CAREFUL ATTENTION TO REFRIGERATION. ON THE OTHER HAND, NITRITE MAY POSE A POTENTIAL CANCER RISK TO HUMANS.

9. IN THE PAST WE HAVE MOVED WITHOUT HESITATION TO BAN OUTRIGHT A NUMBER OF FOOD ADDITIVES WHEN THEY POSE A HAZARD TO HUMAN HEALTH. IN SUCH CASES FDA IS BOUND BY LAW TO ELIMINATE THESE SUBSTANCES, AND HAS ALWAYS DONE SO IN THE PAST WITH THE FIRM CONVICTION THAT THIS ACTION IS SOUND LAW, RESPONSIBLE REGULATION AND WISE HEALTH POLICY. SIMILARLY, USDA IS BOUND BY LAW TO ELIMINATE FROM THE FOODS UNDER THEIR JURISDICTION SUBSTANCES WHICH ARE HARMFUL.

10. IN THIS CASE THE NEED TO BALANCE TWO KINDS OF HEALTH RISKS - ONE BY TAKING NITRITE OUT OF FOOD AND THE OTHER BY LEAVING IT IN - CREATES A DIFFICULT CHALLENGE. WE ARE NOW ASSESSING SEVERAL OPTIONS, WITH THE GOAL OF PROVIDING MAXIMUM PUBLIC PROTECTION CONSISTENT WITH THE LAW. AS SOON AS THIS EFFORT HAS BEEN COMPLETED, AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF OUR DECISION WILL BE MADE. IN THE MEANTIME, THE MIT STUDY IS BEING PLACED IN THE PUBLIC RECORD SO THAT THE PROCESS OF EXTERNAL SCIENTIFIC SCRUTINY CAN COMMENCE." VANCE

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptoning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, PRESS RELEASES, FOOD PRESERVATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 17 aug 1978
Decapton Date: 01 jan 1960
Decapton Note:
Disposition Action: n/a
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
Disposition Date: 01 jan 1960
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978STATE208743
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: JRWEINROTH, M.D.:VO
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780336-0759
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780853/aaaabrzzr.tel
Line Count: 125
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: ed9cf61-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN HEW
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 mar 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1707850
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: FDA-USDA STATEMENT ON NITRITES
TAGS: SWEL, TBIO, EPAP, XX, US, AGR, FDA
To: ALL POSTS
Type: TE
vdkgvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/ed9cf61-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014